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*The drawings in this issue are by Leonard Fortin of North Adams, Massachusetts, Brigita Fuhrmann,
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Origins of the Crisis in Centro America

by Marcia Watson

Few areas in the world are more tightly integrated into the political and economic system of the United States than Centro America. In this isthmus one finds six different nations; all share a dependence on the United States that is deeply rooted in history. But Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama are changing; each is seeking its own identity. That these people often rebel against their own governments suggests they are also rebelling against the United States government, which over many decades has made Centro America a part of its own national system.

The knowledge of the American people about Centro America is clouded by myth and stereotype—some think of “Banana Republics” where comic men with large mustaches ride horses and a rich oligarchy oppresses peasants. One key to understanding Centro America is to recognize its diversity. True, there are some commonalities of language, culture, religion, politics, economics. But the differences are more remarkable. Costa Rica is very different from Nicaragua, and so is El Salvador from Honduras; with its huge Indian population, Guatemala in the North is different from all the others.

Toward the south of Centro America, the number of Indians declines; Costa Ricans take pride in their European background. Costa Rica has a large middleclass population, the base of its democratic political system. In the other countries the middle class is very small and doesn't have the political freedom evident in Costa Rica.

The history of conquest has had a long-range effect on the social, political, and economic future of Centro America. Spaniards conquered these territories and settled in Guatemala, where they controlled the other nations. The present crisis in Centro America originated with the problems which began after the conquest. One of the main problems which arose was the distribution of land. Prior to their conquest, the Indians treated the land as a God. The land did not belong to anyone; an Indian's only right to land was to work it. But the Spaniards did not share the Indian's point of view. When they arrived, in 1502, they con-

fiscated the land and made the Indian their employee.

In the early nineteen-thirties, while modernization was appearing in the social and economic domains, new social and political groups began to emerge, looking for a place in the old elite. An ambitious and rising middle class, some as new military groups and others as civilians, sought to acquire land as a traditional symbol of prestige. In 1932, for example, they seized lands belonging to Indians in one part of El Salvador, forcing the Indians to fight for their rights. More than twenty thousand Indians died in the conflict.

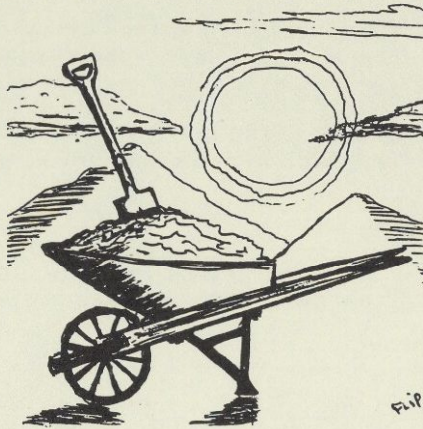
This control of the land has had many negative consequences. A few people owned thousands of hectares. The land that the Indians used to produce their food was now used for export crops. At the same time, the military was able to work its way into

political groups and gain power, because those who previously had power allowed this new class of landowners to participate in the government and make decisions about the future of their countries.

Centro America was not prepared for these changes. In Nicaragua, the Somoza family ruled as dictators for more than forty years, using its position to seize every opportunity to acquire land and become rich. In El Salvador, repressive regimes did not permit any kind of change. In Guatemala

and Honduras, similar situations existed. Modern world economic realities have also contributed to today's problems. The oil crisis affected the area in a negative way simply because Centro America has no petroleum resources.

The new role of the Catholic Church is important, too. A segment of the church agreed with the position of the peasants. In the nineteen-sixties, the Vatican emphasized that the role of young priests would be different: they were told to work for the good of the common people. When the archbishops of the region met in Colombia, in 1968, they redefined the role of these clergymen. Recognizing that it is very difficult to talk about salvation to those who live in misery and despair, church leaders stressed the importance of



saving people by eliminating hunger and poverty and by teaching them about health. Because the people of the region have always been very religious, the new stance by the church has had a great influence. This new attitude of the church has been called the "Theology of Liberation."

As time passed, Centro America continued to witness instability and conflict. In recent years, Mexico and several countries from South America decided to create a group that would try to find a solution to these serious problems. They established "Contadora." After several years of work, and discovering that countries like Nicaragua did not want to participate in Contadora, the movement began to lose hope. Then, in 1986, after a free and popular election, the new president of Costa Rica, Oscar Arias Sánchez, decided to work for peace in the region. Asking the other countries to follow Costa Rica's lead, he traveled through Europe, South America, and North America, speaking to political leaders so that all could understand what was happening in the region and support his peace plan.

After more than a year of deliberation, the presidents of Centro America agreed to a peace plan, which includes the following points: There would be an effort to achieve national reconciliation, using amnesty and dialogue, of groups involved in civil war. To help prevent any escalation of hostilities, an immediate cease fire, a prohibition against future military actions, and a reduction of armaments would take place. To eliminate further the tendency toward militarization, those extra-regional governments which are overtly or covertly supplying military aid to insurgent or irregular forces would be asked to suspend such aid. Politically, the agreement calls for democratization, to include genuine pluralism, freedom of the press, and political participation in free elections. Other measures prohibit the use of territory to attack other states, and require national and international supervision of Centro America's progress toward peace.

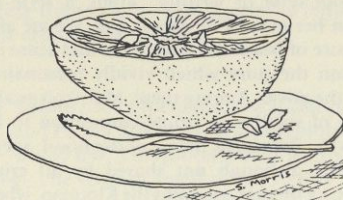
For his efforts to achieve peace, for his insistence that peace in Centro America be achieved by dialogue and not by military actions, the President of Costa Rica won the Nobel Peace Prize for 1986.

Today the Centro American countries are working to fulfill the peace plan, each one from within its own environment and based on its own needs, using existing political, social, and economic structures. The governments of Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, with their own people, within their own nations, are making decisions which must be respected and accepted by all nations of the world.

The United States, as the most important force in the region, should give peace a chance. Centro Americans must solve their own problems to be able to live the next century in a just peace, without suffering, death,

hunger, and poverty.

Marcia Watson was a Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence at North Adams State College during the 1987-1988 academic year. She is a well-known television journalist in her native Costa Rica, most recently as a correspondent covering the war in Nicaragua.



Gone South

by Peter Filkins

Warm winter rain while driving home tonight,
the *squish* of tires replacing hard-packed snow,
makes this December seem like a damp Havana
although I've never been there.

Palm trees, a stroll
along some evening avenue with a honeyed girl
a cafe's yellow wash of light, its smoky rumba
thumps back and forth across my foggy windshield,
the grinding, slow

efforts of the worn-out blades
to carve their double arch, two tunnelled holes
into the future.

For I've gone south for winter,
leaving behind this town of traffic and brick,
where two streets back this guy pulls out and hits
the brakes barely in time

for me to imagine
the skid and crash, the fiery display
of rescue lights across the nestled houses,
faces at the windows pressing concern,

before I swerve
and sail on safe, my mind adrift and dreaming
about a country where I've never been,
where the revolution would be bloodless and free.

Peter Filkins has published his poetry and criticism in The New Criterion, The Iowa Review, Partisan Review, and Hiram Poetry Review. He currently teaches English at North Adams State College and Simon's Rock of Bard College.

The Sense of Smell in *The Bluest Eye*

by Linda Reardon

Susan L. Blake views Toni Morrison as “a writer who is continually singled out for her poetic prose style of writing” (190), a style clearly evident in her novel *The Bluest Eye*. We are afforded the pleasure of beautiful metaphors and sense images throughout the story which vividly personalize and enhance the novel. Among these, Morrison establishes the sense of smell as a prime connection to what I believe is the dominant theme of the novel: prejudice. This belief, although not shared by all critics, is supported by literary critic Phyllis Klotman, who states that society “educates and unconsciously socializes its young with callous disregard for the cultural richness and diversity of its people” (314). In this novel, the reader is able to “smell” prejudice, see its impact on black society, and identify the one element able to minimize its devastating nature — love. The sense of smell also corresponds to the secondary theme of the initiation experience and the effects of racism on the experience. By associating prejudice with this sense, Morrison, I believe, attempts to equate it with the base functioning of man and not the highly developed, enlightened side of man which, ironically, white society purports itself to be.

The theme of prejudice is evident from the beginning of the novel. The story centers upon the black families of the McTeers and the Breedloves. By examining the children of these two families and their experiences in growing up black in America, we learn how the white world “impinges upon the black children and their families while at the same time excluding them” (Klotman 314). Through the employment of the “Dick and Jane” technique, Morrison establishes contrasts between the white world, the world of the impoverished but loving McTeer family, and the totally distorted world of the Breedlove family. The use of the sense of smell corresponds to these three divisions of society.

When we meet Claudia and Frieda McTeer, we sense that these girls, in spite of the assault of a racist society, will survive and be comfortable within their culture and with themselves. Morrison demonstrates this in Claudia’s dislike for the Shirely Temple doll (19), a white symbol of beauty, and through the strong family unit of the McTeers. We realize they are products of poor but supportive parents who provide strong enough roots to establish a positive self-image. This judgement cannot be rendered through modern-day criteria of model child-rearing skills, quality time, and other popular guidelines. Quite the

contrary. These children slip through childhood on the receiving end of ritualistic care and obligation. The uneducated and poor McTeer parents exhaust most of their energy in keeping food on the table and coal in the stove, leaving their children on their own to fill the emotional void, a task they accomplish by interpreting subtle clues from their daily lives.

Recalling an episode from her childhood when she had been ill, Claudia realizes a love that, although not overt, nevertheless was present. Describing its impact on Claudia’s senses, Morrison writes, “I could smell it — taste it — sweet, musty, with an edge of wintergreen in its base — everywhere in that house” (14). Claudia smells the love of everyday home remedies, Vicks, and cold in a world where crisp, white sheets and flowers do not exist for the sick. The love is present, however, in routine, rough-edged practices that belong to “someone who does not want to die” (14).

We smell the authenticity of this family again in the description of the Saturday cleaning and cooking ritual, where “The house smelled of Fels Naphtha and the sharp odor of mustard greens cooking” (24) — natural, earthy odors that neither belie the position of the family nor demean it.

In sharp contrast to this, Morrison juxtaposes the white, “ideal” family of the Dick and Jane readers used in the schools at the time. This family is embodied in the Fishers, comfortably established in a beautiful, large house complete with picket fence and neatly groomed lawn and flowers. The image smacks of cleanliness and sterility. In this house, we are introduced to white woodwork, procelain, polished cabinets, and gleaming copper. One does not smell turnips cooking in here, only “odors of meat, vegetables, and something freshly baked” (86). The clean, fresh odors paradoxically become symbols for prejudice — something that has a very foul smell.

Along with the Fisher family, Morrison introduces us to blacks who try desperately to achieve the “white” life that society has told them is the right life. They endeavor to reach this goal by minimizing and concealing signs and symbols of their blackness. These blacks, represented by Geraldine, will do anything to become white in as many ways as possible. In the process, they lose their authenticity. Here again, the sense of smell captures the hypocrisy inspired by prejudice. Morrison writes that they smell “as sweet and plain as buttercake” and “wash themselves with orange-colored Lifebuoy soap, dust themselves with Cashmere Bouquet talc . . .” (68). It is nothing more than a masking of their own odor with the acceptable

white one. Morrison notes that one does not smell sweat—a natural odor—emanating from these women, but rather an odor of wood and vanilla (68), a substance used for flavoring. The comparison here seems to suggest that however hard these blacks try to be white, they are artificial—blacks flavored white.

Continuing with the description of these blacks, Morrison describes the odors emanating from their homes. Greeting us from Geraldine's house is the odor of "sheets boiled white and hung on Juniper bushes to dry" (68). There are no turnips or mustard greens cooking here to fill the house with acrid and foul odors that would hint at any connection to a culture they have fought desperately to suppress. The food odors in this kitchen are the pleasant "white" odors of coffee and ham. The hypocrisy of this life is revealed, however, through Junior, Geraldine's son. Morrison writes that he longed to play with black boys and "smell their wild blackness" (71). For all appearances, he is white. He dresses white, he eats white, he plays white, but, subconsciously, he longs for acceptance in the culture from which he has been alienated. The effect of this existence manifests itself in his character, that of a deviant personality.

We also see this artificial whiteness in the person of Soaphead Church. He, like Geraldine, is resentful of his black roots and becomes obsessed with cleanliness and purity, in the novel symbols of white culture. Ironically, his character is that of a sexual pervert, the dregs of society in any culture. Like Geraldine, he dislikes anything connected to a real, loving relationship and the physical contact involved. Morrison employs the sense of smell to demonstrate this attitude. "He abhorred flesh on flesh. Body odor, breath odor, overwhelmed him" (131). Church associates cleanliness with his own sexual actions toward young girls. In his letter to God, Church writes, "And there wasn't nastiness, and there wasn't any filth, and there wasn't any odor" (143). As with Geraldine, his clean, fresh smells are only skin deep, masking the hypocrisy of these people and the foul odor of racism.

The assault of racism and its devastating effects on black society is vividly portrayed, ironically, by the Breedloves. This "family" represents the complete breakdown of identity and meaning. Despite their name, there is no love in their midst to overcome the hatred inflicted upon them by society. They are described as extremely and totally ugly, an ugliness born of racism. Even worse than their physical image is that

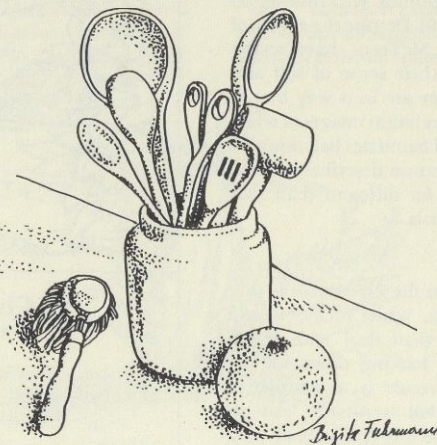
of their self-image: they *feel* ugly (34). Their world is chaotic and distorted, with no apparent unified core. Morrison reinforces this image with the description of their living quarters: a storefront with a collection of odd furniture whose only similarity is detachment. No living goes on in this house, only surviving. Nothing is ever cooking in this house to fill the rooms with odors that will stir up memories in years to come. The theme of prejudice is further developed in that the only odor associated with this group of people is of whiskey emanating from Cholly, which serves to reinforce the image of distortion and chaos.

The initiation experience, as it applies to Cholly and Pecola Breedlove, is also explored in *The Bluest Eye*. This process, like their lives, is not fulfilling. The sense of smell relates to this theme as

well. At the age of fourteen, Cholly finds himself on the brink of manhood, as demonstrated by the watermelon scene. While attending a church picnic, he watches a man holding a watermelon high overhead, ready to dash it to the ground. Waiting anxiously for the splendid moment, Cholly finds himself becoming excited about thoughts of the devil and the fate of the watermelon. Cholly's emerging manhood is symbolized by the suspended waiting state of the watermelon. The image of that intoxicating moment is captured by Morrison through smell and music, itself a cultural symbol: "Far away somebody

was playing a mouthorgan; the music slithered over the cane fields and into the pine grove; it spiraled around the tree trunks and mixed itself with the pine scent, so Cholly couldn't tell the difference between the sound and odor that hung about the heads of the people" (107).

We are encouraged to hope that Cholly's experience will be as pleasurable and satisfying as the sweet red meat of the smashed watermelon. We quickly learn, however, that the experience will not have these qualities. After the funeral of his Aunt Jimmy, Cholly finds himself in a field with Darlene, engaged in his first sexual encounter. At the culminating moment, they are intruded upon by two white hunters who quickly turn the union into a humiliating spectacle. Cholly knows they are white by their smell (116). The odor of prejudice once again impinges upon the black man, in this instance making Cholly's transition into manhood a degrading moment.



Morrison continues with this technique when Cholly finds his father in Macon. As he approaches the man pointed out to him as Samson Fuller, we are once again hopeful that Cholly, despite the humiliating scene at the hands of the white men, will find his manhood here, in the midst of his own culture. The group of men playing craps in the street seem to become a symbol for manhood. Morrison writes, "As he came closer, he inhaled a rife and stimulating man smell" (121). This encounter proves to be as degrading as his sexual one, and once again Cholly feels the pain of humiliation. In the following scene, we find Cholly, completely rejected, soiling himself with his own excrement in the streets of Macon. Instead of the odor of manhood, Cholly starts his journey into adulthood smelling like a dirty baby.

In contrast to this, Morrison describes the old women who were friends of Cholly's Aunt Jimmy, whose rite of passage was a mixture of painful and beautiful memories, "a purée of tragedy and humor, wickedness and serenity, truth and fantasy" (110). Despite the efforts of white society, they, like the McTeers, have secure enough roots to hold on to their sense of self and remain satisfied with who they are in a way that is meaningful and satisfying. They retain images of when "The odor of their armpits and haunches had mingled into a lovely musk" (109). Morrison describes them as finally being free, a freedom far different than that experienced by Cholly and Pecola.

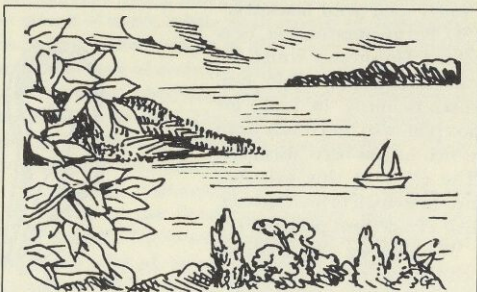
The effects of racism on the Breedloves is that of total disintegration. White society would rather destroy them than deal with them. Blacks elevate themselves by looking down on the Breedloves. For Cholly the result is a completely deviant anti-social behavior that eventually leads to death. Pecola's fate is an escape into the madness of a self-created world where her imaginary blue eyes give her the beauty she longs for. Her world is one in which she will never again have to breathe in the foul odor of prejudice.

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Linda Reardon is a nontraditional student majoring in Elementary Education at North Adams State College; she will be awarded her baccalaureate degree in May, 1989. Her article was originally written as a paper for a course entitled "Literature and Society," which focused on issues of race, sex, and class, taught by Professor Meera Tamaya of the English/Communications Department.

Toni Morrison is not only one of the foremost Afro-American novelists writing today, but she is also a leading American novelist whose profundity of vision and innovativeness of form place her in the forefront of contemporary fiction writers, a fact which has been recognized by the award of the Pulitzer Prize for her most recent novel, *Beloved*.



To Chris on an Island

by John Flynn

I weep when Manhattan fogs
knowing that each night
a few rapes will go unreported.

I could not live in that nightmare
though I reluctantly live with it.

My only sister
I'm breaking apart...
I want to save you
from the pigeon streets
from the platinum sky
from the stink and noise
from where you want to be.

Remember, there is a corner here for you
close to dawn, close to sunset
close to the terror slowly consuming
your brother.

John Flynn, a native of Central Massachusetts, has been published in *Thresholds*, *Calliope*, and *The Newport Review*. He resides in Kansas City, Kansas.

Exploring Issues in Women and Health

by Sumi Colligan and Michele Ethier

In the Fall Semester, 1987, we co-taught a special topics course entitled "Women and Health." This interdisciplinary course involved the fields of anthropology, sociology, and social work. We believed our combined academic strengths would make this endeavor more powerful. Our goal was to help our students understand that health issues faced by women in the United States are no isolated phenomena but are international in scope. Cultural attitudes concerning women and health become more apparent in a comparative perspective. Drawing upon examples from other cultures allows students to challenge their own assumptions and to become more open-minded about personal and political options. In addition, when students can examine myths about their own culture, they are in a better position to develop new outlooks on accepted suppositions.

We felt particularly qualified to teach this course because of our experience and training. Michele Ethier completed a master's thesis in sociology on battered women, and she wrote her master's thesis in social work on teenage pregnancy. Sumi Colligan holds a doctorate in cultural anthropology and a master's degree in public health. Like many women, both of us have encountered negative responses from the medical establishment. These personal experiences have sparked our interest in exploring women's health issues and in examining the male-dominated, capitalistic system of American health care.

The impetus for this course is an outgrowth of the Women's Health Movement, which coalesced in the late nineteen-sixties. The purpose of the Movement was threefold: raise consciousness about women's health needs, provide women-managed health-related services, and challenge the paternalistic and patriarchal structure of health care institutions. By the nineteen-seventies, women had realized that women's health issues crossed national boundaries. When the Dalkon Shield was outlawed in the United States, the A.H. Robbins Company, which manufactured the intrauterine device, marketed it in Third-World countries. Another example of the expansion of United States technology and medical ideology includes what Adrienne Rich

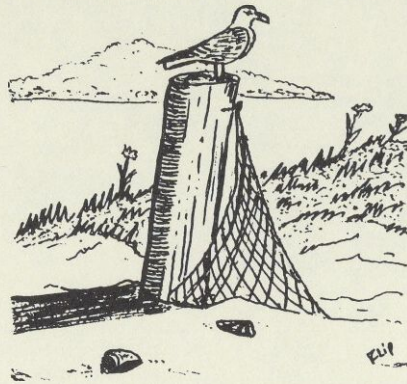
calls the "the theft of childbirth." Increasingly, the birth process is incorporated into a medical setting in which decision-making is in the hands of technocrats. This process is taking place despite evidence that hospital birth is not always the best for mother and child. As feminists active in the Women's Movement, we consider it important to bring these issues before our students for examination and exploration.

The aforementioned processes and events led us to formulate a number of objectives for the course. We examined women's health as problematic and dynamic issues, focusing on the historical and sociocultural context in which women's health has been, and is, defined. In Victorian society, for example, women were thought to be controlled by their reproductive anatomy. Exposure to or participation in the outside world was limited because physicians in the nineteenth century believed that women would become overexcited and thwart their reproductive potential. A contemporary example of cultural factors impacting on women's experiences of their own bodies is the prevalence of eating disorders among American adolescent females. In exploring

these issues, we discussed societal images of beauty, social expectations of "femininity," exercise regimes and weight loss industries targeted towards women, and aggressive and sexist advertising campaigns.

Since women's health needs are often treated as a response to the doctor's normative views on sexuality, we addressed sexuality in a cultural and social framework and applied a bio-psycho-social model for understanding variations in sexuality. We emphasized that gender identity and sexual orientation are learned, and that those who adopt nontraditional behaviors are not necessarily unhealthy. Moreover, we considered reasons why single, married, and homosexual women who want to have children encounter certain social obstacles imposed by the medical profession.

A final objective was to explore special populations of women and societies' stereotypes of them. We discussed metaphors for menopause and how the



implicit message of the metaphors conveys pathology. We explored reasons why poor and minority women are used as experimental populations. We raised questions about the cultural conditions which promote rape and wife battery, and we offered evidence that challenges the assumption that violence against women is natural and inevitable.

The books we selected were provocative. *Herculine Barbin* (1980), a diary of a nineteenth-century French hermaphrodite, stimulated inquiry into gender classification systems and the impact of socialization on gender identity and sexual orientation. *Birth in Four Cultures* (1983), a cross-cultural investigation of childbirth in the Yucatan, Holland, Sweden, and the United States, illustrates that birth is not simply a biological event. The examples drawn from Holland, Sweden, and the Yucatan demonstrate that efforts to reduce maternal and infant mortality rates in the United States require a reexamination of the political, cultural, and structural factors which mold our current childbirth practices. *The New Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1984), a publication of the Boston Women's Health Collective, provides invaluable information about ways in which women can take responsibility for their bodies, to own and control them.

In addition to the theoretical concepts, a variety of teaching techniques conveyed the practical applications. Contraceptive devices were displayed and their uses were demonstrated. Experimental exercises were utilized to help students discover their hidden attitudes and feelings about themselves and others. Guest lecturer Dr. Mary Ellen Cohane discussed her efforts to negotiate selected birthing alternatives with her obstetrician and the regional hospital. Cathy Maye, a lay midwife, showed slides of home births she had attended and talked about why certain women are attracted to non-medicalized births.

Our most difficult task was to help students see that the problems which women encounter in the health care system are not simply products of an individual's personal circumstances but are rooted in the characteristics of the larger society. We continually had to address comments like "Each doctor is different and it's just a personality quirk."; "Don't women provoke abuse?"; or "Women in other cultures are ignorant." In order to penetrate the ethnocentric and parochial lens of the student, we probed the questions of private troubles versus public issues. Throughout the course, we tried to elucidate women's health issues by using a sociological imagination.

According to written evaluations which we solicited at the end of the semester, students believed they had gained a greater understanding of the medical profession's attitudes toward women and the implications of these attitudes for the treatments which women receive. The response of student Cathy Markham, in particular, appears to summarize a learning process common to many other students: "I came into the class not knowing what to expect. I progressed to being uncomfortable because I was challenged to think about issues that I would rather leave locked away. Finally, I

was able to open myself gradually to a budding new consciousness, began to talk about the class to friends, and determined to study and explore on my own."

Of course, not all students endorsed our approach unequivocally. One student thought our orientation was "too feminist." The student believed that a cross-cultural perspective lacked validity because women in other cultures may not react adversely to such experiences as rape. The student also defended patriarchy by suggesting that women are their own worst enemies. Several students wished there had been more time for discussion because in order to foster critical thinking on the issues posed by the class, students need to think out loud and receive immediate feedback.

While we recognize students' rights to their opinions, we feel justified in maintaining a feminist orientation which gives a voice to women who have traditionally been silenced and whose point of view has been ignored. Furthermore, implying that women are their own worst enemies obscures the structural variables that impede women's growth and development.

In reply to the desire for more discussion, we plan to integrate more opportunities for students to share their ideas and reactions. We hope to achieve a greater balance between covering the broad-ranging facets of women and health and allowing sufficient time for students to process these issues in a manner comfortable to them.

We see our course on women and health as making an appropriate contribution to a liberal arts education. The concepts and ideas learned in the course help students make more responsible decisions in their personal lives. The course also encourages students to pursue the issues to which they have been exposed in order to remain informed citizens capable of evaluating the pros and cons of various social policies. Students gain a greater tolerance of cultural and individual diversity; at the same time, the interdisciplinary approach enables them to see the relatedness of issues faced by women around the world.

Co-teaching afforded us an opportunity to benefit from each other's pedagogical style and expertise. We learned from each other about how to teach difficult and controversial topics. We also furthered our own knowledge of each other's disciplines. Being in the classroom together gave us a chance to exchange insights about our students and their individual biases. Our common bond as women, social scientists, and friends has strengthened our resolve to engage in similar cooperative projects in the future.

Sumi Colligan's interest in women's health issues emerged from her exploration of the interrelationship of culture, health, and illness and of comparative health care systems studied in a public health graduate program.

Michele Ethier became interested in issues of women and health when she was writing her master's thesis on the sociological factors which contribute to teenage pregnancy. Her interest has widened to include other adolescent age-specific phenomena such as anorexia and bulimarexia.